DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 995 CE 084 387

AUTHOR	Beder, Hal; Medina, Patsy
TITLE	Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education. NCSALL Research Brief.
INSTITUTION	National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Boston, MA.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning (ED/OERI), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	4p.; For the full report, see ED 465 026 or http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/research/report18.pdf.
CONTRACT	R309B60002
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/research/br_beder.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Basic Skills; *Classroom Environment; Educational Policy; Educational Practices; Educational Research; Group Behavior; *Group Dynamics; Influences; Learning Processes; *Literacy Education; Oral Language; Peer Relationship; Social Behavior; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Student Relationship; Thinking Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*Classroom Effectiveness; Impact Studies

ABSTRACT

The effects of adult literacy classroom dynamics on the content and structure of instruction, learning processes, and classroom behavior were examined in a study during which 20 adult literacy classes in 8 states were observed and the teachers of those classrooms were interviewed. Key findings were as follows: (1) most classroom instruction focuses on developing basic skills rather than on higher-level abilities; (2) although teachers rank learners' needs as their top priority, their teaching doesn't reflect this goal; (3) seven classroom processes--sanctioning, engagement, directing, helping, expressing values and opinions, and community--are important in understanding adult literacy education in classrooms; and (4) class composition, enrollment turbulence, and funding pressure shape classroom dynamics. The following were among the study's implications for practice, policy, and research: (1) if literacy entails acquiring higher-level as well as basic skills, current instruction is deficient; (2) lack of open discussion may impede development of important oral literacy skills; (3) inclusion activities could help teachers increase community in classrooms at little expense; (4) relatively homogeneous classes seem to promote sharing and community; and (5) the relationship between tardiness and dropping out, relationship between community and key instructional outcomes, and best practices in managing continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels merit further research. (MN)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 471 995

Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education

NCSALL Research Brief

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CE084387

Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education

A NCSALL Research Brief

Hal Beder • Patsy Medina

This, the first major study in a quarter century to investigate classroom behavior in adult literacy education, considers questions critical to adult literacy education: How is instruction delivered? What is its content? What processes underlie teaching and learning? And what external forces shape classroom behavior? The findings can help policymakers, teachers, and researchers better understand these important issues.

Our study observed 20 adult literacy classes in eight states and interviewed the teachers of these classes. Although the sample size is limited and findings are not meant to be generalized to an entire population, the study generates new understanding and propositions for future research.

The Content and Structure of Instruction

The content and structure of instruction fell into two general types: discrete skills instruction (found in 16 of the 20 classes), characterized by teacher-prepared and teacher-delivered lessons conveying factual information and emphasizing basic skills development, and making meaning instruction, focused on developing higher-level abilities and teacher-learner collaboration. If the essence of becoming literate is the acquisition of concrete skills and factual knowledge, this norm has merit. If, however, literacy also entails critical thinking, problem-solving ability, oral as well as writing proficiency, creativity, and an understanding of how society works, the norm is substantially deficient.

Despite teachers' proclaimed desire to meet learners' needs, we found little evidence that teachers systematically assessed learners' needs or evaluated whether instruction met individual or group needs. However, we found that teachers behaved in learner-centered ways in their affective relationships with learners.

Social Processes in the Classroom

We identified seven classroom processes important to understanding the adult literacy education classroom: sanctioning, engagement, directing, correcting, helping, expressing values and opinions, and community.

Across the sample, we observed considerable tardiness and tuning out, which, unlike in other educational settings, were almost universally tolerated rather than negatively sanctioned. The greatest significance of these behaviors is that they may signal an intention to drop out, an endemic problem in adult literacy education. Understanding how tardiness and tuning out relate to dropping out could help teachers identify at-risk learners and

Key Findings

- Most classroom instruction focuses on developing basic skills, not higher-level abilities.
- Although teachers rank learners' needs as their top priority, their teaching doesn't reflect this goal.
- Seven classroom processes--sanctioning, engagement, directing, helping, expressing values and opinions, and community--are important in understanding adult literacy education classrooms.
- Class composition, enrollment turbulence, and funding pressure shape classroom dynamics.

Implications for Practice

- If literacy entails acquiring higher-level as well as basic skills, current instruction is deficient.
- Lack of open discussion may impede development of important oral literacy skills.
- Inclusion activities could help teachers increase community in the classroom, at little expense.

Implications for Policymakers

- Relatively homogenous classes seem to promote sharing and community.
- Continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels are serious and understated problems in the adult literacy classroom.
- How funds are allocated is as much an issue as the amount of available funds.
- Staff development should be mandated, and funding for it should increase.

Implications for Researchers

- How tardiness and tuning out relate to dropping out should be better understood.
- The relationship between community and key instructional outcomes requires further study.
- Best practices in managing continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels should be identified.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

successfully intervene. It might also lead to new teaching methods that reduce the likelihood of learners' dropping out.

We also observed that teachers rarely asked learners about their feelings, opinions, or beliefs, which may impede development of important oral literacy skills. In only about a quarter of the classes was community pervasive. Assuming that community is important in producing desired educational outcomes, teachers need additional training, beginning with brief inclusion activities they could use with new learners to provide valuable gains with little expenditure of resources.

Shaping Factors

Classroom dynamics were shaped by three strong forces: class composition, enrollment turbulence, and funding pressure.

Relatively homogenous classes seemed to promote community, with gender, age, and ethnicity being the most important elements. Continuous enrollment made it difficult to create a sense of community because class membership was always in flux. It also made it difficult for teachers to use complex teaching methods, such as project-based learning or peer coaching.

We concluded that continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels are among the most serious and understated problems in adult literacy education. Better ways to manage these problems are possible, however, and we propose a systematic search for best practices, which should then be shared with teachers and program administrators.

Funding source regulations and eligibility requirements often determine what kinds of learners are served and the content and length of their instruction. How funds are allocated is as severe a problem as the amount of available funds. When all means of improving instruction quality are considered, professional development stands out as the most important. Leadership, strategic planning, and resources are required. Finally, if professional development is to receive the resources it needs, the 1998 law permitting but not requiring expenditures for professional development must be changed. Staff development must once again be a mandated function and the funds allocated to it increased.

Hal Beder is a professor of adult and continuing education and chair of the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Administration at Rutgers University. Patsy Medina is a research analyst at Rutgers University.

For a full or summary report on the Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education Study, or to learn about other NCSALL efforts connecting research and practice to strengthen adult literacy education programs, visit http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu to download a free electronic version, or contact NCSALL at (617) 482-9485 for a low-cost print version.

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) is a partnership of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee, Portland State University, and Rutgers University. NCSALL is funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, Award Number R309B60002, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement/National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning, U.S. Department of Education.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").